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Suits Me: The Double Life Of Billy Tipton



Synopsis

The jazz pianist Billy Tipton was born in Oklahoma City as Dorothy Tipton, but almost nobody knew the truth until the day he died, in Spokane in 1989. Over a fifty-year performing career, Billy Tipton fooled nearly everyone, including Duke Ellington and Norma Teagarden, five successive "wives" with whom Billy lived as a man, and three children who he "fathered." As Billy Tipton herself said, "Some people might think I'm a freak or a hermaphrodite. I'm not. I'm a normal person. This has been my choice." This jazz-era biography evokes the rich popular-music history of the Great Depression and reads like a detective story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Billy Tipton was a jazz performer who played in clubs throughout the Midwest for nearly 50 years. Tipton never made the big time as a musician and ended up working as a booking agent in Spokane, Washington. Only with Tipton's death in 1989 was it revealed that the five-times-married father to three boys was biologically female. Diane Wood Middlebrook's biography describes the transformation of Dorothy Tipton, a white Oklahoman who was not allowed to play jazz because she was a girl, into Billy Tipton, a male pianist and bandleader. The author traces the life of this itinerant jazz musician over several decades and through changing constructions of gender. Middlebrook, whose biography of Anne Sexton was noted for its controversial use of tape recordings and notes made during the poet's psychiatric treatment, was approached by Kitty Tipton Oakes, one of Billy's former wives, to write this biography; she interviewed his/her friends, spouses, family members, and

colleagues and found them to have different, yet universally sympathetic, readings of Tipton's gender. In addition to examining what gender is, *Suits Me* also asks to whom it belongs: the individual or the people who interact with the individual. --Rebecca Brown --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Middlebrook (Anne Sexton: A Biography, Houghton, 1991) will fascinate another large audience with her exhaustive account of the life of jazz musician Billy Tipton. Born Dorothy Tipton in Oklahoma in 1914, and reborn as Billy Tipton in 1933, Billy passed as a man until death at age 74. *Suits Me* uses family interviews, anecdotes from musicians, jazz fans, lovers ("wives"), and friends to tell the story of a brilliant deception. The sensitive storytelling reveals thought-provoking perspectives about gender and the traditional American family, while capturing the social history of traveling jazz bands for 40 years. The family photographs and letters are particularly noteworthy in the exploration of Billy's life between the sexes, and there are extensive, enlightening notes and a bibliography. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries and/or libraries with women's studies or gay/lesbian/bisexual collections. --Lisa N. Johnston, Sweet Briar Coll. Lib., VA Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I am familiar with Billy Tipton through his two records and a few magazine articles I had read in my early teens. When I found out this book existed I was very eager to get my hands on a copy. Even though I am well aware that there is no way to get a completely accurate picture of a man who died in 1989, I still had a few expectations: Small facts about his gigs, perhaps a well educated opinion piece on transgender issues, stuff like that. The author delivered on facts, though I can't say that they would be too interesting to anyone who wasn't already interested in the first place. Personally I found the author's writing style to be a tad too dry, but I was still satisfied with that aspect of the book. If *Middlebrook* had stuck to the facts, I might have rated it a 4. Unfortunately, as I should have guessed from the title, the author felt it would be appropriate to sneak in her uneducated opinion on Tipton's story. Really early on in the book (page 8) *Middlebrook* insinuates that Billy, living as a married/divorced straight man (complete with a male gender marker on his ID) with adopted children who saw him as a father, was simply an act for the sake of an intentional low-key career in Jazz and that "she" wanted "her" accomplishments to be brought to light in the end, as if his death was all part of the show. I'm no expert, but not only is this theory unlikely, it makes for annoyingly poor reading. There isn't a lot of information on Billy Tipton out there, so if you are really interested in him get the book. If you are looking for an informed and educated opinion on transgender issues and

how they could have applied to Tipton, walk the other way and don't look back.

I am always on the lookout for interesting books. I got the recommendation from Bob Dylan's show "Theme Time Radio" and I have to admit that I was a bit sceptical about Tipton's dual role and the attempted coverup and whether this book would end up being a dull one. It was neither, the story was fascinating and apparently true and the writing was vibrant. I came in with few expectations and ended up with no regrets. Enjoy it.

The sheer thought that a woman the public had access to passed as a male jazz musician in the mid 20th century is mind-boggling. Only until Billy Tipton's death was her secret revealed. I found myself racing through this book at every spare moment satisfying my curiosity for how she pulled off her "show". The collection of photographs and memoirs is great.

Good

Amazingly interesting book.

It surprised me that such a fascinating subject could become a difficult to enjoy and ultimately unsatisfying read. The author's avoidance of focussing on Tipton's homosexuality and seeing her life as a pragmatic decision due to her love of jazz and the constraints of her era are a major weakness in this book. It was not a "hard to put down" but a "can't get through it" read.

Billy Tipton, the product of flamboyant parents, was exposed to the Depression Era's rich jazz scene via radio. Knowing her options were limited as a female, she took the guise of a male for the rest of her days, living with various clueless women who were willing to settle for a celibate relationship. Alas, her success was both initiated and limited by her masquerade. There were simply too many people who remembered her as "Dorothy" back in Oklahoma, and she had to turn down many high profile musical gigs as a result. Ironically, her big break in the Fifties that she had to turn down was the opening spot for Liberace! "Suits Me" is a fine example of detective work and offbeat 20th Century history.

It's not as exciting as I thought it would be, but it is a biography so it is a telling of his life.

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